

BUYING HELP

Struggling to play modern games

Q My kids want to play games on my PC. However, I don't think my computer is up to the task as it has an integrated graphics processor. Can I fit a graphics card? I don't want to spend too much. My PC has an Epox EP-P4MK1-P motherboard and a 2.4GHz Celeron processor.

Tony Moore

A There isn't a cheap and easy way to bring your computer's graphics up to date. The EP-P4MK1-P motherboard has a 1.5V AGP 4x graphics card slot, which means it won't accept modern PCI Express graphics cards or even get the best from current AGP cards. Your Socket 478 processor is also quite old, so buying a more modern motherboard to suit it will be difficult. You could install a Socket 478 motherboard with an AGP 8x slot and an AGP 8x graphics card, but even then your gaming experience would be limited by the slow Celeron processor.

If you want your computer to play modern games, you'll almost certainly need to install a new graphics card into a new motherboard and buy a new processor and RAM to go with that motherboard. Sensible components to choose would be the PowerColor X1950 Pro graphics card, the MSI P965 Platinum motherboard and the Intel Core 2 Duo E6300 processor. The total cost will be around £370. Having changed all these parts, you'll need to reinstall Windows, so it's not a simple task.

You could buy a new PC, but you're looking at spending over £500. The last time we reviewed PCs



▲ The latest graphics cards, including the excellent PowerColor X1950 Pro, won't fit in older AGP motherboards

costing around £400, they were incapable of playing modern games due to their integrated graphics. If your only reason for upgrading is so your children can play games, it might be simpler to splash out on a Nintendo Wii console. This console, which costs around £170, will play new games for a couple of years. A cheaper option is the older PlayStation 2 console, which costs £90 including VAT new, or Nintendo's GameCube, which is cheaper still. The GameCube is several years old now, so you can pick one up for around £30 second-hand with games costing only a few pounds each at eBay (www.ebay.co.uk).

INTRODUCTION

If you don't know what type of product you need, or are wondering whether or not a particular product will work with your computer, then contact *Buying Help*.

If you want to buy a new desktop or notebook computer, please provide details of how much you want to spend and the type of tasks you want your new PC to perform.

If you're looking to buy an upgrade for your computer, you need to include as much information about your current system as possible. Knowing your computer make and model, processor, amount of memory and motherboard model can help us provide more accurate advice.

Tom Royal

Our Labs Editor can recommend the best product for your specific requirements.

buyinghelp@computershopper.co.uk



Buying a notebook with Vista

Q I want to buy a new notebook PC with Vista Home Premium preinstalled. It has to be powerful, and ideally I'd like a Core 2 Duo processor, 2GB of RAM, 512MB of dedicated video memory and a 200GB hard disk. Do you have any suggestions? I want a product that's good value and will last a least a couple of years.

Joel

A We haven't yet seen a notebook that fits your requirements exactly, but there are two recent products you should consider.

If your priority is a powerful notebook, take a look at Evesham's Voyager C720DC. It has a fast Core 2 Duo

processor, 2GB of RAM and a powerful GeForce Go 7950 GTX graphics chip. It uses Windows Vista Ultimate edition, which gives you even more features than Home Premium. Its hard disk holds only 100GB of files, but 200GB disks aren't commonly available yet. The main downside is its price. At £1,700 including VAT, we don't think it's particularly good value.

If you don't fancy spending the best part of £2,000 on a computer, you might want to look at Sony's Vaio VGN-FE41E. It has a Core 2 Duo processor and Vista Home Premium, but it comes with just 1GB of memory and a less-powerful GeForce Go 7400 graphics chip. At just £800 including VAT, it's excellent value, and won a Best Buy award last month.

Replacing a faulty hard disk

Q I have an HP Pavilion zv5410us notebook with a 60GB hard disk. The hard disk is faulty, and I want to replace it. Can I fit a hard disk with a larger capacity instead, or should I use another 60GB disk?

Barrie Carpenter

A We were surprised by how hard it was to find technical information on the Pavilion zv5410us. After a lengthy conversation with

an HP representative, we were told that it uses a 4,200rpm, PATA 60GB hard disk, and that you can upgrade to a 100GB 4,200rpm disk if you wish.

You'll find a helpful set of step-by-step diagrams showing how to replace the hard disk, plus other documentation, at <http://tinyurl.com/36ujrr>. This page contains information relating to the Pavilion zv5002AP, but HP has assured us that everything contained within it is equally relevant to the computer that you own.

Can I make a website with no software?

Q I need to create a simple website (just text and images) for an art project, but I don't have any web-design software or enough time to buy and learn how to use one. Is there a quick way to create a website without needing to use any software?

Claire Roberts

A There are a few online website builders out there. Two that we've used and like are Google Page Creator and 1&1's WebsiteBuilder. You need a Gmail

email account to use Google Page Creator, so if you don't have one, you will need to go to <http://mail.google.com> to sign up for one. You can design your pages by choosing layout and colour-scheme templates and filling your pages with text, pictures, links and various fun off-the-shelf gadgets such as a clock or music player. The scope for customising your pages is limited, but it's extremely easy to use.

The main downside of Google Page Creator is that the <http://yourname.googlepages.com> style of web address doesn't look very professional. If you want a proper domain name (such as

www.yourname.com), buy one from www.1and1.co.uk and sign up for its 1&1 Beginner web-hosting package, which costs £2.34 per month. This will provide you with access to WebsiteBuilder, a service that helps you build a relatively sophisticated website via a friendly wizard-based interface.

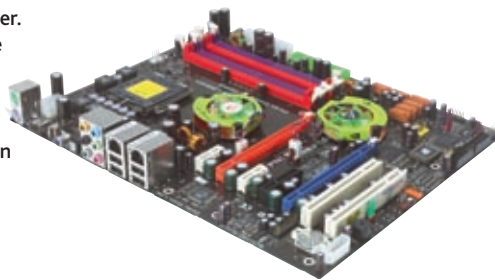
If you're in a rush, bear in mind that it can take between 24 and 48 hours for a new domain name to become fully functional. This is the time it takes for the world's domain-name servers (DNS) to be updated with your domain and its IP address.

Which chipset should I choose?

Q I want to build a desktop computer. I know I want to use an Intel Core 2 Duo processor, but I'm not sure which motherboard chipset to choose. I have tried to do some research on the internet but with little luck. The information available seems to be either outdated or inconclusive. Could you recommend a few good chipsets? I'm particularly interested in an Intel chipset, but I'll consider other manufacturers if they are better.

Wahid Bashir

A There's more to a motherboard than the chipset it uses, so when picking one for your new PC you should take a look at our motherboard reviews. We recommend MSI's P965 Platinum, which costs under £100 and is based on Intel's P965 chipset. Its BIOS gives you comprehensive



▲ The ECS PN1 SLI2 Extreme is a great motherboard if you want to build a powerful Core 2 Duo computer

control over your computer's settings, and it's very good value. We also like the ECS PN1 SLI2 Extreme, which costs around £112 and uses Nvidia's nForce 590 chipset. With lots of clever extra features, such as a FireWire 800 port, it's a good buy if you want to build a powerful PC.

Is an external hard disk the answer?

Q I have had my Advent 7081 computer for over a year now and I think it could do with a bit more power. I was considering adding a new hard disk. How easy would it be to add one, and how much would this cost? Should I fit an external hard disk? These seem to be popular at the moment, and the prices of external disks are very good for the power they offer.

D Kerr

A Adding a bigger hard disk to your notebook computer won't increase its power, but it will give you more room to store files and programs. Adding a larger internal hard disk to a notebook can be a tricky task, though. If you need more storage space, we recommend buying a portable external disk instead. Seagate's 160GB Portable External Hard Drive costs around £130 and will give you five times as much storage space as you have at the moment.

If you want to make your computer run faster, we recommend adding more memory rather than a new hard disk. We couldn't find out exactly how much memory was installed in Advent 7081 notebooks in the factory, so go to www.crucial.com/uk. Use the system scan tool to find out how much memory is in your computer, and whether you can add more. Upgrading to 1GB of RAM should give your computer an extra turn of speed, and it's usually an inexpensive upgrade. 

Wanted: graphics card without the noise

Q I'm in the process of building a Media Center PC for my living room. I've picked out a Core 2 Duo processor, motherboard, hard disk and DVD writer, but I need to select a graphics card. I'm using a standard desktop PC case, as I can hide this behind my LCD television.

I want my PC to be able to play the latest 3D games, but I'm also keen to keep it as quiet as possible. I know most powerful PCI Express graphics cards use a noisy fan – can you recommend one that is quieter? I'm happy to spend up to £150.

Martin Devereux

A It's true that most modern graphics cards make a lot of noise, but there are exceptions. One of our favourites is the Gigabyte GV-RX195P256D-RH. Rather than having a small but noisy fan, this card has a Zalman heatsink and fan as enormous as its



▲ You can buy a graphics card that's both powerful and quiet

model name, and it is extremely quiet when in use. It uses an ATI Radeon X1950 Pro chip and 256MB of memory, and it managed to run our Call of Duty 2 test at 1,600x1,200 at 36.6fps. As long as your case has room for its large cooler, this card should fit your needs perfectly. It costs £136 including VAT.



▲ Adding an external disk will give you extra storage space, but it won't speed up your computer